A BUDDHIST'S GUIDE TO ASURA'S WRATH PART 1 - BUDDHIST CYBORGS AND THE STORY OF THE ASURA

Posted 24 January 2012
By Richmond Lee

Hello. My name is Richmond Lee Chaisiri. I am a professional game artist who grew up in a Buddhist household in Thailand, the most Buddhist nation on earth. I will be your tour guide through the wild, wonderful and very very well researched world of Asura's Wrath. So what's Buddhist about Asura's Wrath?

Everything!

The Characters, the environments, the ultra violence, the cosmic scope, the super powers, the anime hair … All of it! Let's begin the tour!

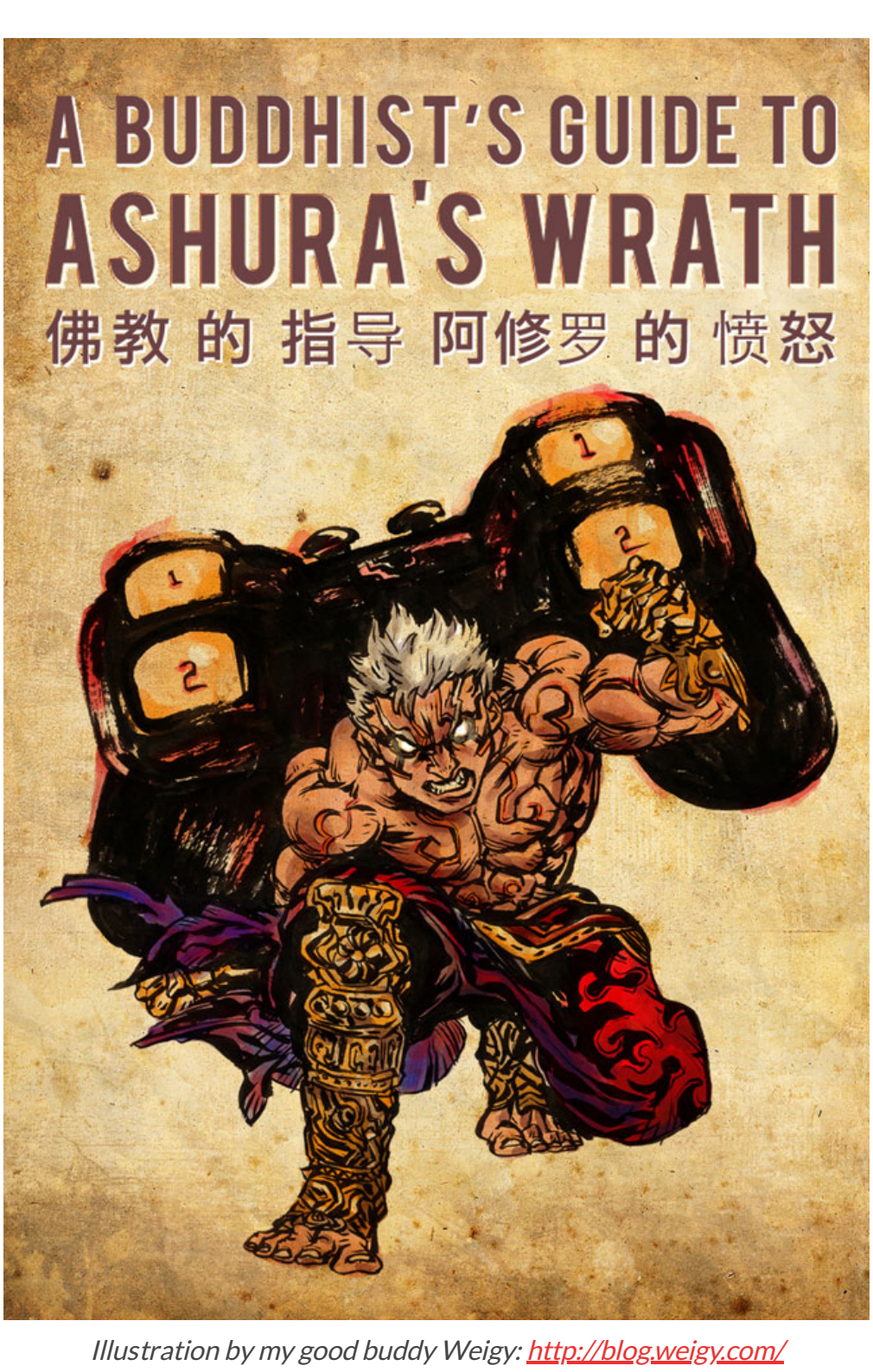
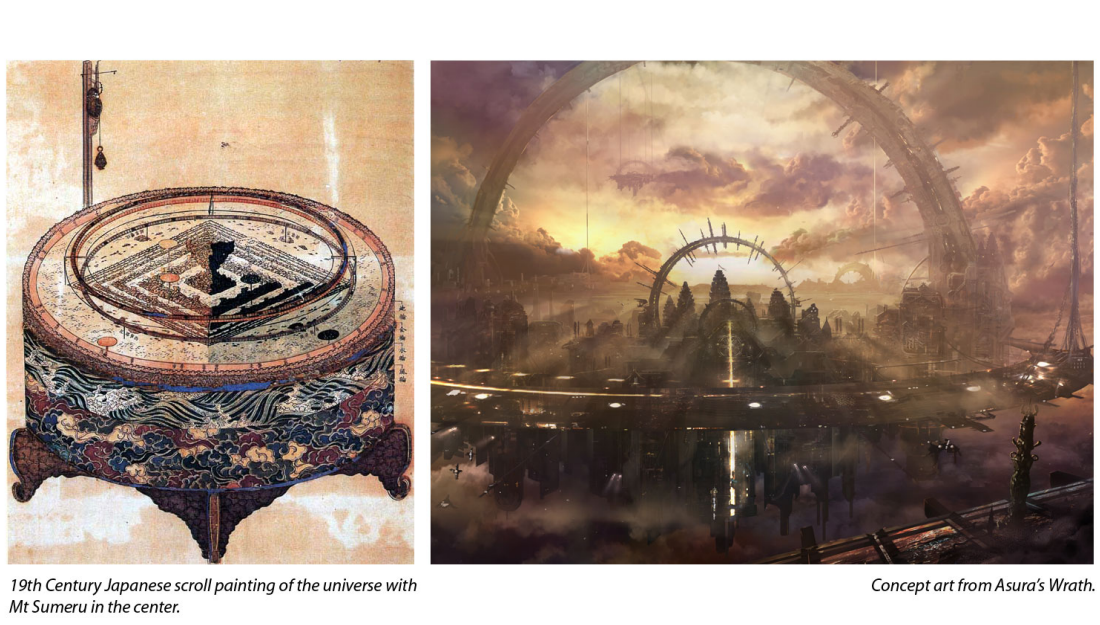


Illustration by my good buddy Weijy: http://blog.weijy.com/

- A Buddhist's Guide to Asura's Wrath Part 1 – Buddhist Cyborgs and the story of the Asura
- A Buddhist's Guide to Asura's Wrath Part 2 – The Bishop's Staff and Hungry Ghosts
- A Buddhist's Guide to Asura's Wrath Part 3 – The Mighty Vajra!

The Story

Asura's Wrath tells the tale of a bellicose god who is betrayed by his fellow deities, stripped of his powers and cast down from the heaven and swears bloody revenge. Does this sound like the plot of God of War 2? Sure! But it's also the age old story of the Asura (also commonly spelled "Ashura"). According to Buddhist tradition, Asuras once lived alongside the Devas (their more benevolent cousins) in a city called Trayastrimsa on the peak of Sumeru, a holy mountain at the center of the universe where the earth joins with the heavens.

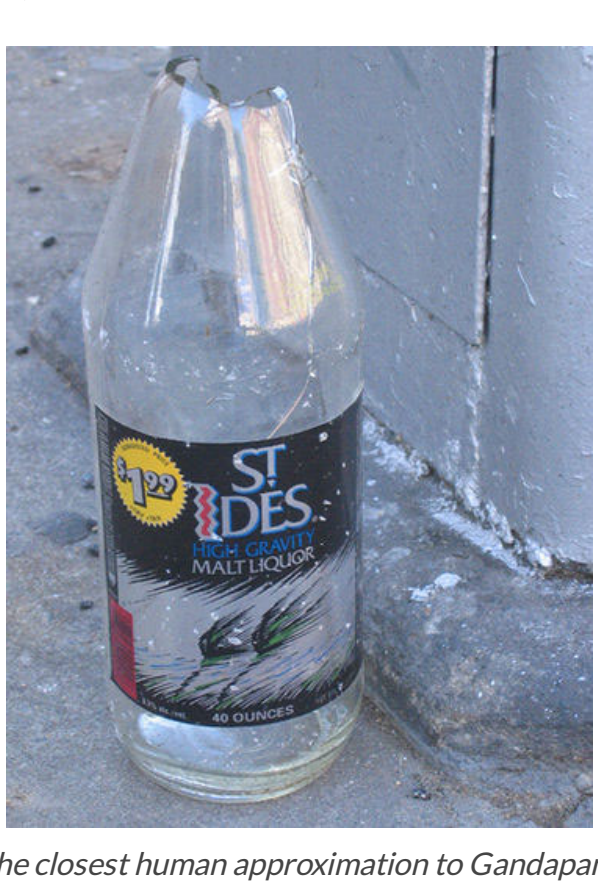


19th Century Japanese scroll painting of the universe with Mt Sumeru in the center.

Concept art from Asura's Wrath.

Asuras Wrath Mt_Sumeru

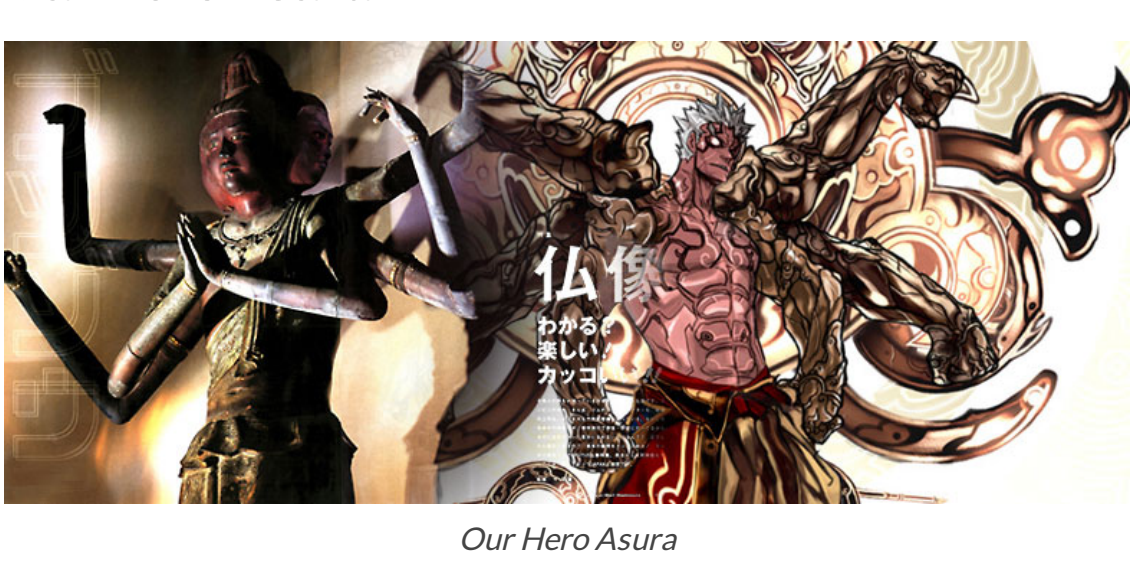
The Asuras were quarrelsome beings who loved to pick fights. They finally crossed the line when they went on a drunken rampage after drinking a forbidden supernatural liquor called gandapāna, which Sakra (known in Hinduism as Indra), leader of the heavens, warned them not to imbibe.



The closest human approximation to Gandapana

This angered Sakra so much that once the Asuras passed out from their bender, he gathered them up and threw them off of the edge of Trayastrimsa (which you will recall is the highest point in the world). Upon waking at the foot of Mt Sumeru, the Asuras realised their sudden eviction and vowed revenge. Thus the Asuras took up arms and began their war with the Devas that would last thousands of years.

Our Hero Asura



Our Hero Asura

In Buddhism, 'Asura' (阿修羅) does not denote a specific god, it's the name of a race of warlike beings that embody wrath, pride and a thirst for power. Asuras first appeared in the ancient Indian epic The Rigveda which lead to their incorporation into Hinduism and later Buddhism. Asuras are often called the Asian god of war (which is what this game is often referred to as haha), but that's something of a misnomer. Asuras epitomize the warlike state of mind, but they are not patron gods of war. It's important to note that Asuras are not necessarily evil, they just tend to care about material gain over spiritual gain. Just like people, they have a capacity for good or evil and everything in between. Although they're more powerful than humans, it's considered unfortunate to be reborn as an Asura as they live in constant strife.

Six Arms

Asura; 12th Century; Sanjusangendo Temple in Kyoto, Japan.

Photo by Miguel Michán

Asura sanjusangendo temple

Asuras are almost always classically depicted as young men with 6 arms and 3 faces (never any more).

Japanese lacquer statue of Asura, date unknown to me (possibly 8th Century Tempyo period based on the style and subject matter)

Asura's Wrath, 2012

Asuras Wrath next to lacquer statue Ashura

In Asura's Wrath, our hero starts with a regular number of limbs, but sprouts extra arms when his anger reaches a boiling point. Extra heads and appendages are common in Buddhist and Hindu art and have great symbolic value. Multiple faces represent heightened consciousness (the ability to see in multiple directions at once) and multiple arms represent heightened power and reach.

Asura; Rubber; 1983, Kinkeshi Period (known in North America as M.U.S.C.L.E.)

Late 20th century depiction of Asura performing his patented "Asura Buster"

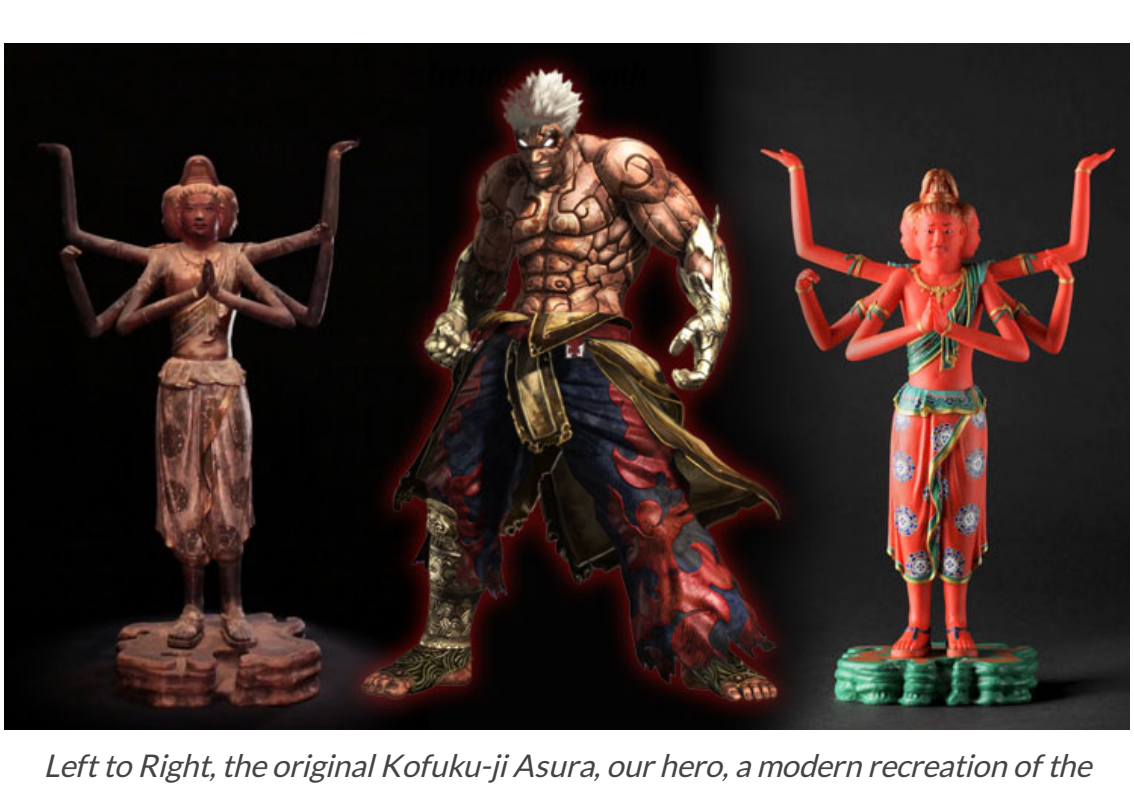
Asuras Wrath Asuraman Kinnikuman

In general, more appendages denote more power. Asuras are fairly low ranking in the cosmic scheme so they're never depicted with more than 3 pairs of arms. In comparison, Kannon (観音) the goddess of mercy is often depicted with 1000 arms (symbolic of her ability to reach out and relieve the suffering of any living thing in the universe).

More arms mean more power

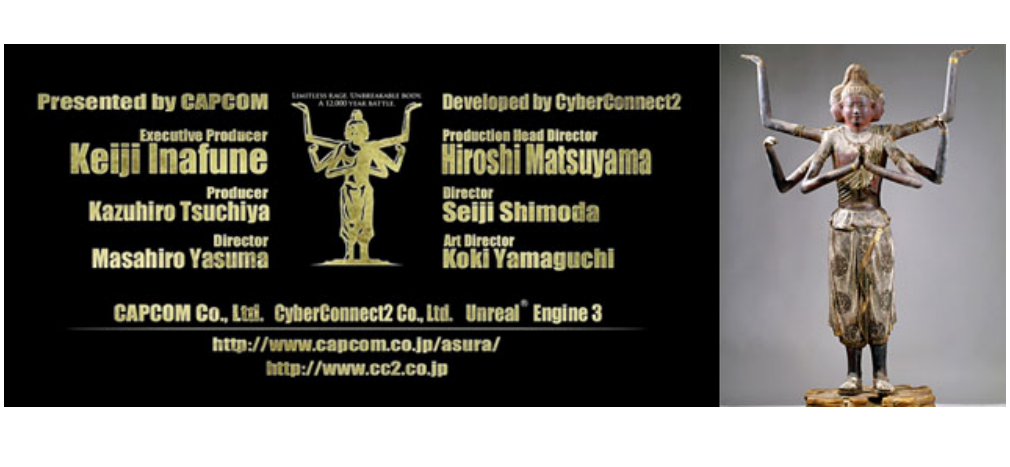
Orange complexion

Long before the first member of Jersey Shore or ganguro donned the first spray tan, Asuras have been sporting a healthy orange glow. The most famous example of this is the Asura at Kofuku-ji temple in Nara, Japan's first capital. Like the Kofuku-ji Asura, our protagonist has orange skin.



Left to Right, the original Kofuku-ji Asura, our hero, a modern recreation of the Kofuku-ji Asura. Notice that Asura's skin color is almost identical to the original faded statue

The designers of Asura's Wrath take many cues from the Kofuku-ji Asura. How do I figure? It's easily the most famous depiction of an Asura in art history; it's a protected national treasure of Japan; plus they totally used its silhouette for the production company's logo.



Presented by CAPCOM
Executive Producer
Keiji Inafune
Producer
Kazuhiro Tsuchiya
Director
Masahiro Yasuma

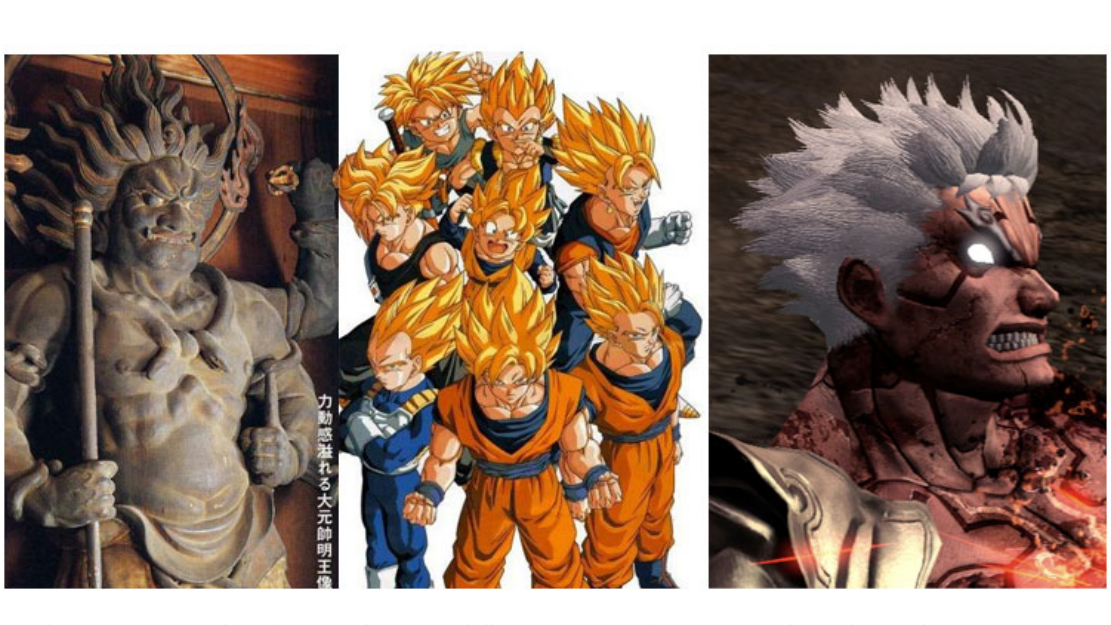
LIMITLESS RAGE. UNBREAKABLE BODY. A 12,000 YEAR BATTLE.

Developed by CyberConnect2
Production Head Director
Hiroshi Matsuyama
Director
Seiji Shimoda
Art Director
Koki Yamaguchi

CAPCOM Co., Ltd. CyberConnect2 Co., Ltd. Unreal® Engine 3
http://www.capcom.co.jp/asura/
http://www.cc2.co.jp

Manga Face and Dragon ball Hair

Although Asura sports a very modern manga face that looks like Guts (from Berserk) gone Super Saiyan, this isn't really anachronistic as Asuras are typically depicted as handsome young men. Besides, spikey glowing Super Saiyan hair has long been a characteristic of Buddhist Deities.

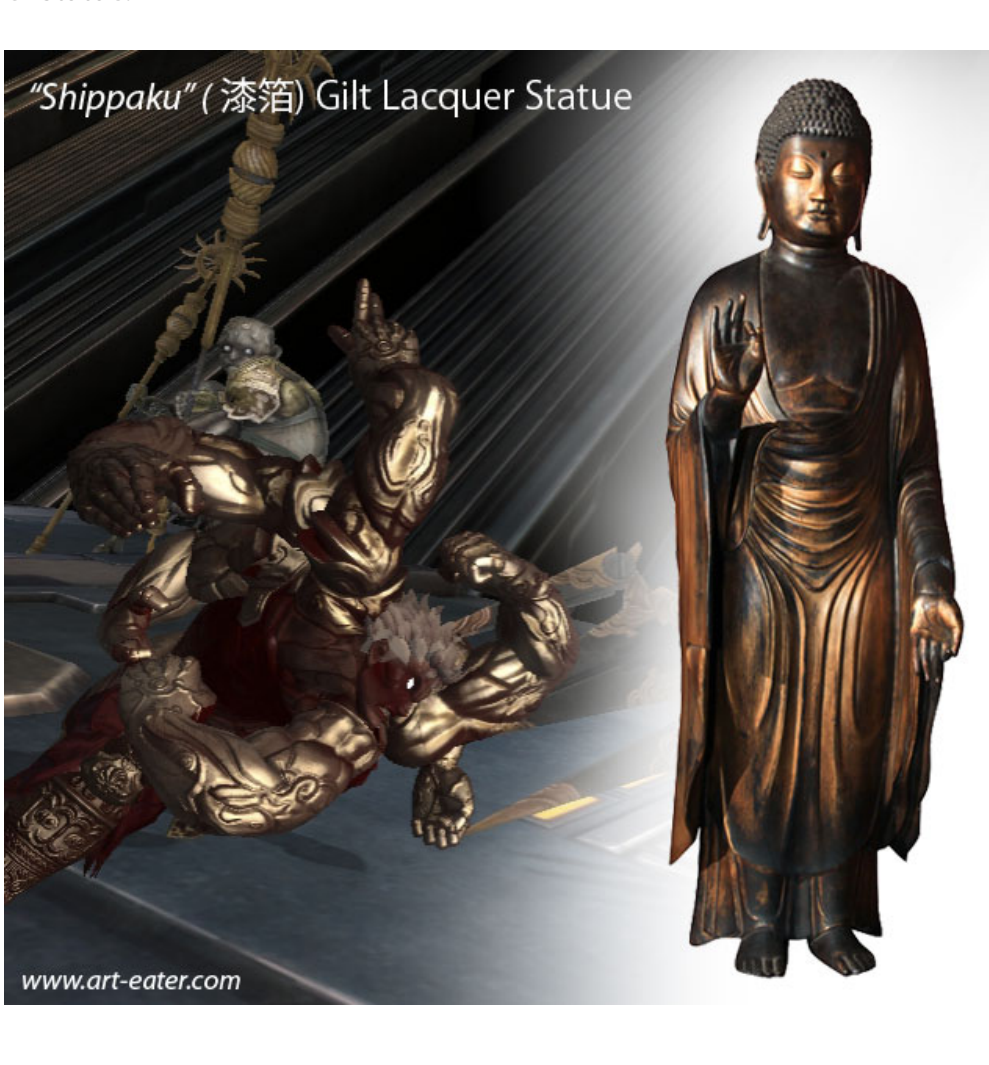

力動感溢れる大元帥明王像

In her fantastic book, Reading Buddhist Art, Meher McArthur describes Asuras as "wrathful beings with wild spiky hair." It's worth noting that in Dragonball, in order for a character to go 'Super Saiyan' they must first experience a state of supreme rage.

Laquer Skin

The characters in Asura's Wrath have a unique look fashioned after Buddhist statuary. As they take damage, their skin begins to peel away in layers like a lacquer statue. The amount of thought, research and effort that went into conveying this process makes me smile from ear to ear.

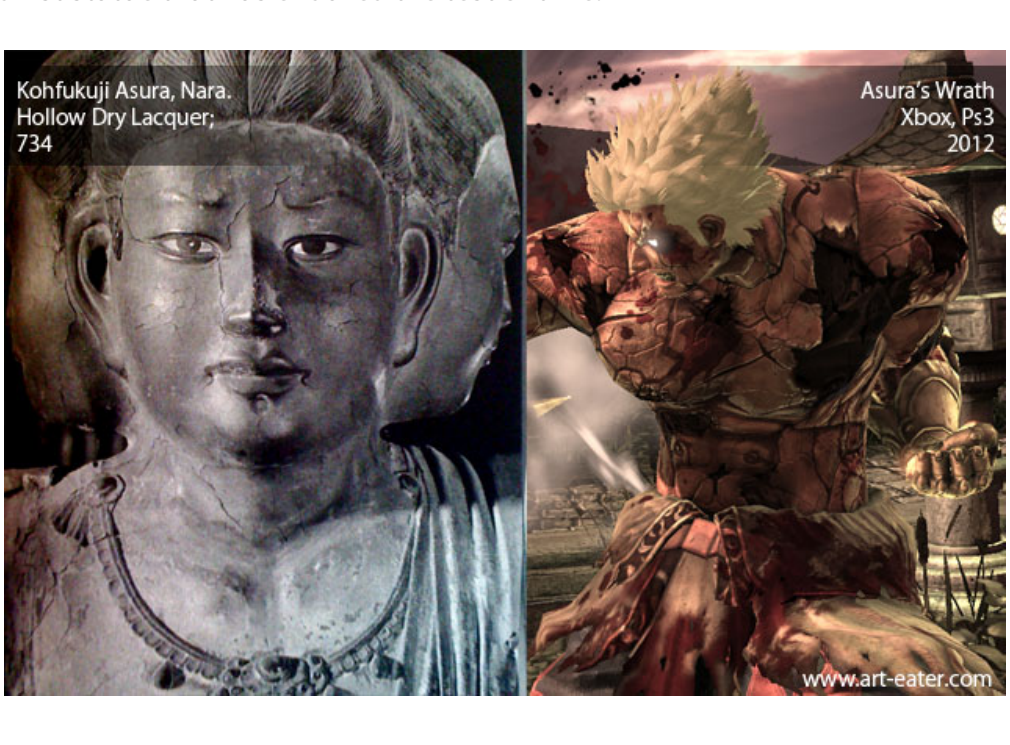
When Asura's at full capacity, he has the beautiful clean sheen of a gilt (gold covered) lacquer statue.

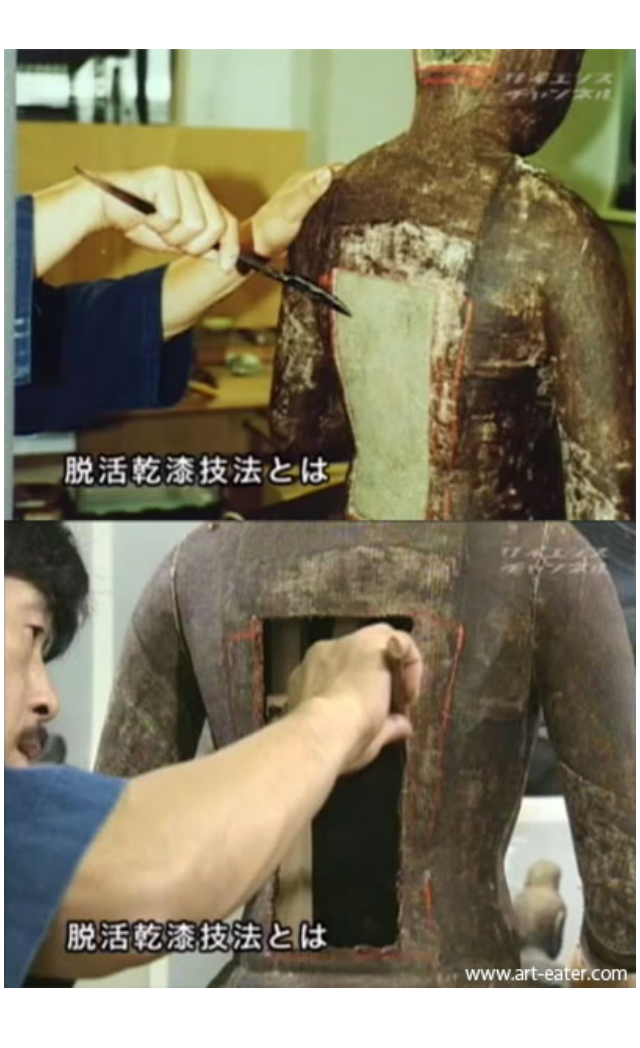


As he takes damage the gold chips away in a manner that recalls gold leaf (which is often ritually affixed to statues in Buddhist traditions around the world).

Asura's Wrath
www.art-eater.com
Gold leaf covered statues in Chiangmai Thailand

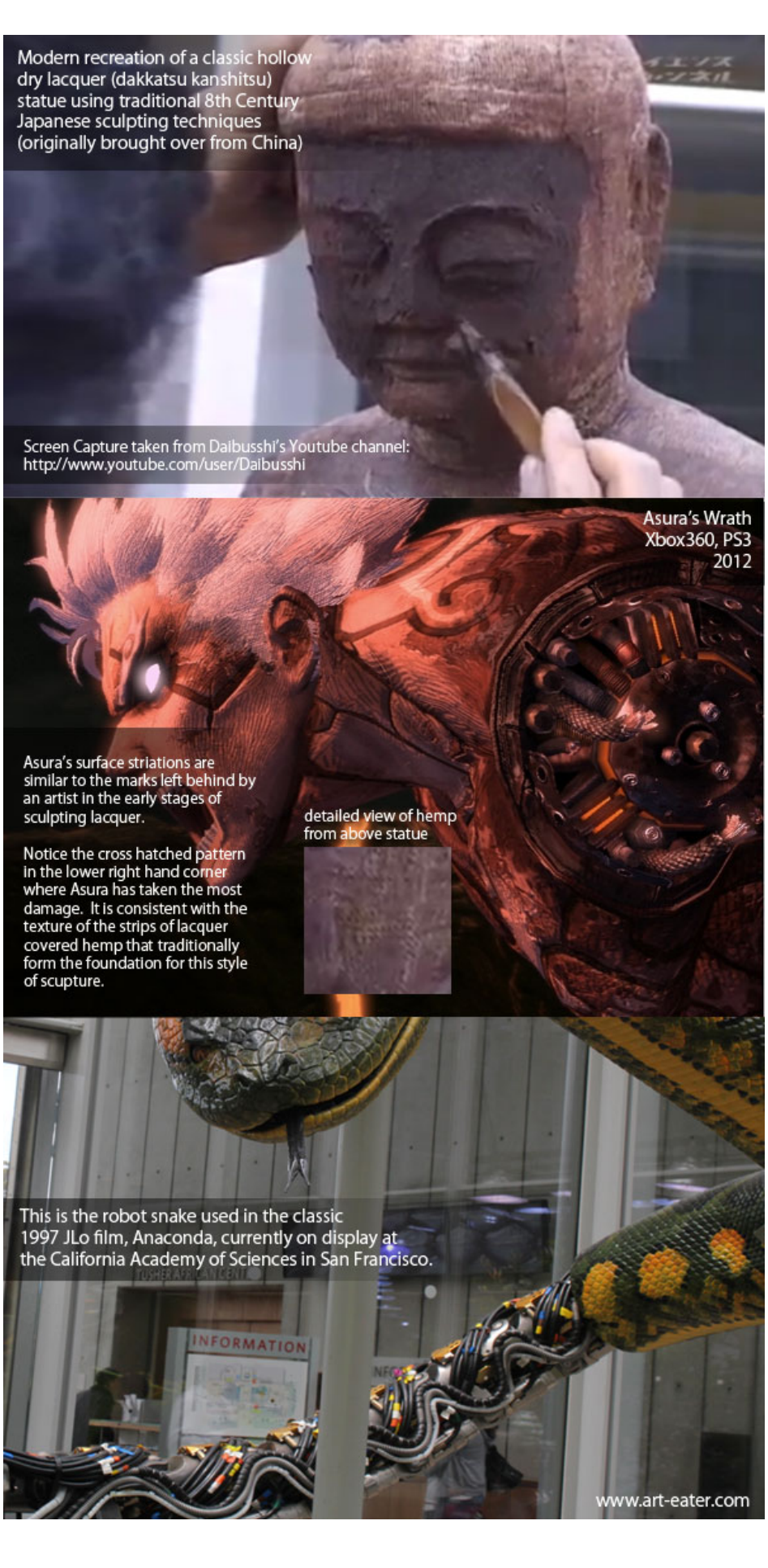
When Asura is seriously wounded, he cracks and peels just like a real centuries old Buddhist statue that has endured the test of time.





A master artist hollowing out the clay from a Dakkatsu Kanshitsu (Hollow Dry Lacquer) statue

It's a very cool way to imbue the characters with a sense of mythology and high technology, making them feel like Buddhist cyborgs. It's simply awesome.



Modern recreation of a classic hollow dry lacquer (dakkatsu kanshitsu) statue using traditional 8th Century Japanese sculpting techniques (originally brought over from China)

Screen Capture taken from Daibusshi's Youtube channel: http://www.youtube.com/user/Daibusshi

Asura's surface striations are similar to the marks left behind by an artist in the early stages of sculpting lacquer.

Notice the cross hatched pattern in the lower right hand corner where Asura has taken the most damage. It is consistent with the texture of the strips of lacquer covered hemp that traditionally form the foundation for this style of scupture.

detailed view of hemp from above statue

This is the robot snake used in the classic 1997 JLo film, Anaconda, currently on display at the California Academy of Sciences in San Francisco.

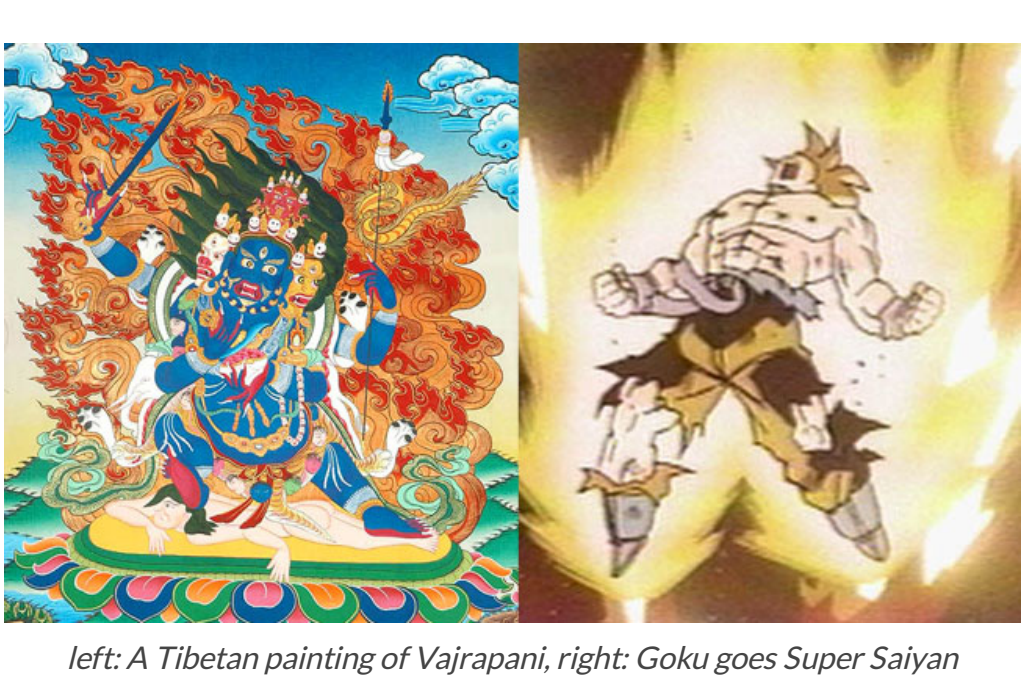
For more information on Buddhist lacquer sculptures, here's a fantastic video that gives an in depth look at the creation of a traditional Japanese Buddhist lacquer statue:

D
Hollow Dry Lacquer (脱活乾漆) - Ancient Japanese sculpture
Watch on YouTube

Flaming Auras, Halos and Mandorlas

Augus (Asura's mentor, to the right) sports a plain and regal style of halo that was popular during the Kamakura Period (1185–1333) in Japan, a time of great strife where Buddhism flourished. It compliments his weapon of choice, the Kitana, a specifically Japanese weapon that's not traditionally used by Buddhist deities.

As the characters in Asura's Wrath engage in battle, they emit so much power that their auras flare up like flames. This is a staple of Japanese fighting comics, but it's also a convention in Buddhist art that's trickled down into both modern media and traditional religious imagery the world over.

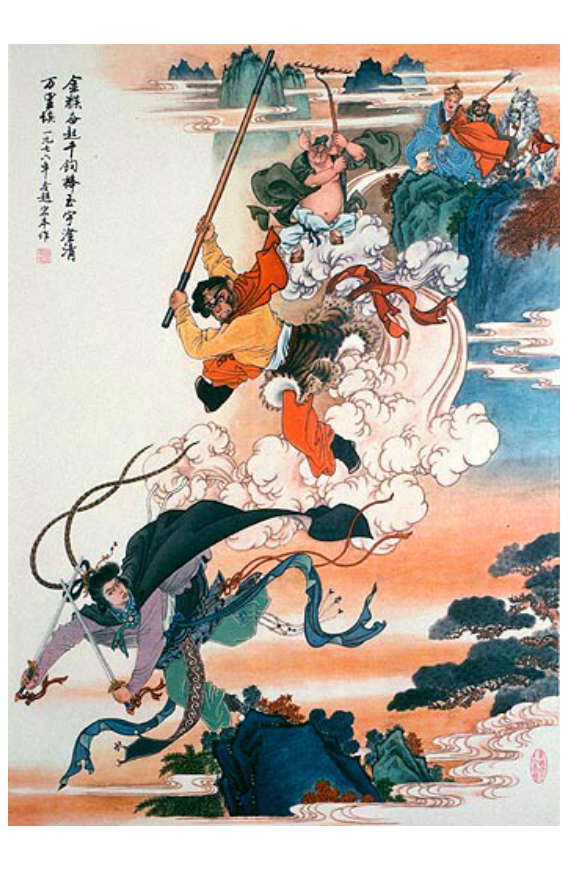


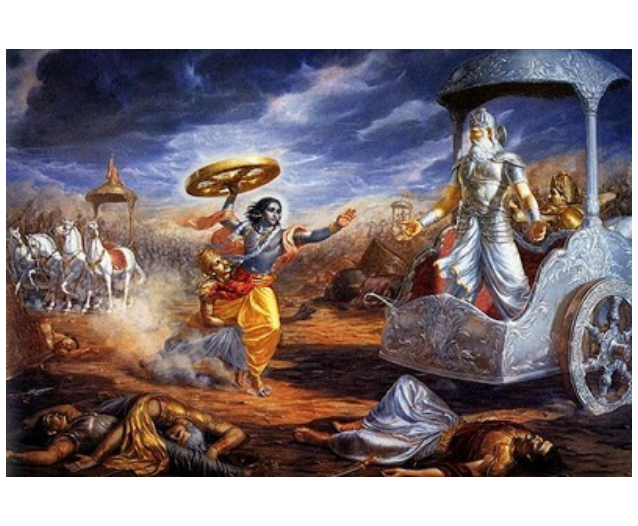
left: A Tibetan painting of Vajrapani, right: Goku goes Super Saiyan

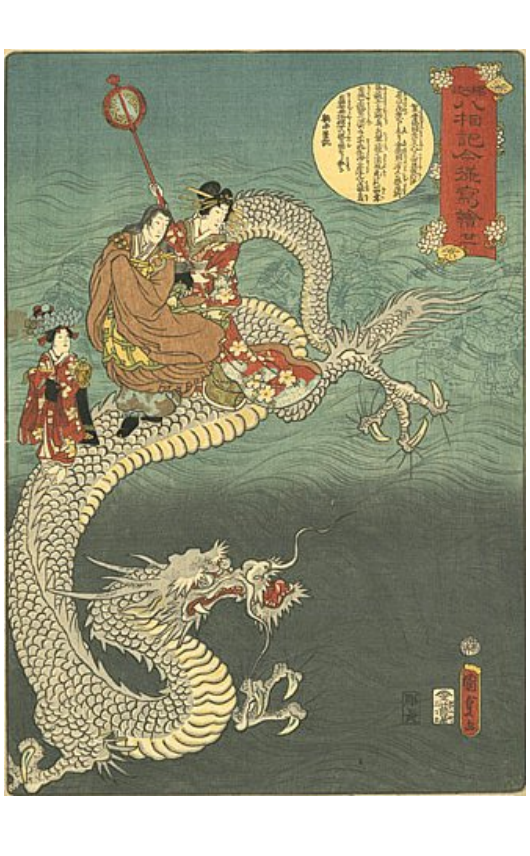
Halos have been employed in Buddhist art for thousands of years. Typically a circular pattern around the head denotes enlightenment, while a flame pattern around the upper body or entire body denotes power. These conventions also exist in Christian art in the form of aureoles (radiant burst of light emitted from a holy figure) and mandorlas (the shape of 2 overlapping circles named after the Italian word for "almond"–but it sounds quite a bit like "mandala" doesn't it?).

Super Powered Kung Fu Fighting

Asura's Wrath draws easy comparisons to Dragonball and other Anime–and for good reason, many contemporary conventions in anime, comics and games have deep roots in Buddhism. Buddhist and Hindu lore is full of violent clashes between super powered beings powering up and utilizing secret special moves.







The crazy over the top fighting in Asura's Wrath is perfectly in line with Buddhist tradition. If that sounds strange to you just remember: BUDDHISTS INVENTED KUNG FU!

Shaolin Kung-fu
少林功夫

That's all for today. Join in next week as we explore the rest of the cast of Asura's Wrath and where they fit into the Buddhist pantheon!

Full List of Asura's Wrath Articles Here:

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